

News Media Consumption and Political Interest in Latin America

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Abstract

For media communication researchers, a relationship between media consumption and democratic politics is expected and evidenced. Explanations for that relationship are elusive. This is especially true in developing regions such as Latin America where our understanding of how news media consumption affects individuals is only now beginning to take shape. Building on extant work regarding news media and democratic politics, this project embraces the idea that political interest is the key to understanding how media consumption affects individuals politically and thus requires focused attention in scholarly research. News media are viewed as a socializing force that influence political interest by providing information about current events that are generally relatable to politics. From this perspective, the relationship between news media consumption and political interest is tested using robust survey data taken from the Latin American Public Opinion Project 2008 dataset. Statistical analysis reveals that Latin Americans who consume news media do have greater interest in politics. However, one type of news media fails to demonstrate an effect which calls into question the qualities of each news media type.

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The relationship between media consumption and democratic behavior is generally expected and widely established. The expectation that consuming media affects individuals' political behavior hinges on the role that information plays in inspiring behavior. Writing long ago about the ideal participatory society, Aristotle (1997) emphasized that communities that were too large would likely have problems guaranteeing an informed electorate. That is not to say that all individuals need be highly educated. Instead, political participants should be informed about things related to the political decisions they were being asked to make. Since the dissemination of these Aristotelian ideas, informed citizenship has been held as a necessary condition for effective participatory political systems. With the modern revival of democracy in the late 18th century, the role of information and mass media was immediately highlighted as intrinsically important to the advancement of participatory society (see Tocqueville, 1840). Thus, the expectation that democratic individuals should be informed is now pervasive. In today's society, the role of mass media in providing that information and inspiring effective participation is of primary importance to thinkers and scholars alike (see Diamond, 2008).

Over the last three decades, social science researchers have endeavored to identify the processes by which mass media and its consumption actually compels political behavior. Scholars, through a myriad of research methods, appear comfortable asserting that consuming mass media products corresponds to changes in political attitudes and behaviors (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Iyengar, 1987; Norris, 2000; Prior, 2007). They have even gone so far as to assert that consuming media can cause changes in attitudes and behaviors that directly reflect the media product consumed (see Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997). However, the increased nuance of the academic studies engaged by researchers has left the discipline with little ability to speak in general terms about the relationship between media consumption and individual attitudes and behaviors. What is known is that there is a relationship present between media and politics. What remains to be identified is the link between the two. Political interest may be that link.

Trying to better understand the relationship between media and politics, Pippa Norris (2000) revealed what she called "a virtuous circle" where news media consumption, political interest, and political participation existed and changed in concert with one another, each feeding the next. Although a clear causal direction remained elusive (and even potentially inappropriate),

Norris clearly illustrated the strength of the relationships. To her, understanding how news media affect political behavior could be best captured via individuals' interest in politics. While much academic energy had been invested in identifying and understanding the media-politics relationship, Norris' promotion of political interest as the key to understanding the relationship is unique in its potential generalizability, despite the fact that her research focused on the postindustrial states of Europe and North America. Therefore, this project endeavors to test that relationship in a different context by attempting to answer the question *Is there evidence that news media consumption affects Latin Americans' interest in politics?*

Shifting the area focus of academic studies often promotes the use of existing theories and research methods with the only change being that of the population of interest. That research method has proven quite useful when similarities are expected. As media have expanded in their scope and penetration, similar mechanisms are expected to be present in each context. Research that established the presence of media effects like agenda setting (see Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), information provision (see Bartels, 1993), framing (see Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Tversky & Khaneman, 1981;), and priming (see Krosnick & Kinder 1990) never assumed that those were functions of media in developed countries alone. And although media have grown exponentially, that growth in all contexts has followed a distinctly western model like the one found in the United States and Europe.¹ The shape and importance of media in new democracies is emphasized in Katrin Voltmer's edited book *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies* (2006). She concentrates on the role played by mass media in new democracies and asserts that media fulfill the same roles in new democracies that they do in older more established democracies.

But should there be a reasonable expectation of generalization from the highly developed regions of Europe and North America to a region like Latin America that has substantial variation across economic and political indicators? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the two main factors of interest herein: media products and political interest.

¹ See Salzman and Salzman (2009) for a description of media development in Central America.

To be clear, this research project is concerned with the most information-rich media product; news media. As in Europe and the United States, the media industries of each Latin American state are responsible for producing their own news broadcasts, of which there are likely many. Fortunately, this project looks to very simple, yet specific aspects of news products that are present in all media industries. Each country studied by Norris and herein has a news media industry. Each news media outlet reports, at least in part, on politics. And individuals consuming those news media products are expected to respond similarly depending on the amount of the product (i.e. news) consumed. In this instance, the affected attitude is political interest.

What is political interest and is it similar across populations?² Individuals who are interested in politics give their attention to the topic of politics. Individuals may hold an interest in politics for efficacious reasons. They may desire to compel government behavior regarding a topic of concern. Conversely, individuals may be drawn to politics for the spectacle, thus rendering the following of politics a pastime of sorts. Many people are amused by politics and politicians. Campaigns provide a competition unique in contemporary society (see Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn, 2004). Whether out of concern/apathy or amusement, individuals hold varying interest in politics regardless of location. Thus, despite the variation across cases, answering this research question in a comparative manner holds much promise.

Before trying to understand how watching television news or reading a newspaper might shape political interest, it is important to recognize that interest in politics can meaningfully influence political behavior and democratic politics at-large. It is well established that individuals' attitudes about politics can influence their political behavior (Almond & Verba, 1963; Bratton, 2009). For instance, the most basic behavior in democracies is voting (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978) and individuals who are more interested in politics are more likely to vote (Norris, 2000). Thus, among the plethora of factors that determine the probability of political participation, political interest ranks high on the list. Unlike the many demographic factors that move in concert with political participation, political interest may be shaped by outside influences including news media. But as it is one of potentially numerous influences on participa-

² There is no firm definition of *political interest* as the term is somewhat self-defining. In research such as this and that advanced by Norris (2000), political interest is best captured in the simple survey question, how much interest do you have in politics?

tory politics writ large, this project should only be seen as a starting point for additional research to build on and clarify. That is, this project only focuses on one part of Norris' virtuous circle, the news media consumption and political interest relationship. Understanding how participatory politics are affected should be the primary focus of future projects.

The best method for testing the relationship between news media and political interest is to focus on the individual level. Although there are often macro-level political and economic forces that affect media (and vice versa), those effects are secondary to the impact that media consumption can have on individuals who then act within democratic regimes. Though individual level studies of media effects in Latin America have expanded in recent years (see Boas, 2005), most of that research reflects the need for increased specificity as few large-sample studies have emerged (see Perez-Linan, 2002). Thus, after digging deeper into understanding exactly how news media consumption affects political interest among individuals, a statistical test will be conducted that breaks apart different news media types and examines its effects on a random sample of individuals from the Latin American region.

1. Political Interest and the Socializing Power of Mass Media in Latin America

According to Thompson (1995, 10), "In all societies human beings engage in the production and exchange of information and symbolic content." That exchange is fundamentally cultural with a strong connection to social context. The idea that an exchange of information and symbolic content can compel individual attitudes is not obvious. In order for the reception of a media output to affect individuals, there must be some power exchange. As stated by Michael Mann (1986) there are four classes of power; economic, political, coercive, and symbolic power. Each type of power can affect individuals to the point of motivating attitudes. To understand how news media consumption might affect individuals, it is necessary to focus on symbolic power.

News media purposely convey information and symbolic content to an extent that exceeds other media types (i.e. entertainment media). "Symbolic actions may give rise to reactions, may lead others to act or respond in certain ways to pursue one course of action rather than another, to

believe or disbelieve, to affirm their support for a state of affairs or to rise up in collective revolt” (Thompson, 1995, 17). The essence of mass communication is lodged in the symbolic forms it produces, the values placed on those symbolic forms, and the distribution of those forms across time and space and within the purview of the public.

Even if those symbolic forms are given value and distributed throughout society, how do we know that they will affect individuals? When provided information, individuals learn (Miller, 2005). When provided with valuable symbolic forms, “it enables individuals to reorder the spatial and temporal features of social organization, and to use these reordered features as a means of pursuing their objectives” (Thompson, 1995, 31). Operating in an explicitly political environment, individuals provided with information and valuable symbolic forms are expected to react in accordance with that information and those symbolic forms. This symbolic power is the mechanism that induces certain attitudes by individuals alone or in mass. However, the degree to which the symbolic power of a specific media output affects individuals can be a function of the affected attitude.

Political interest can be more easily and often shaped by news media consumption than conflictual attitudes such as partisanship or religion. This is true for two reasons. First, news media present a great deal of political information. Most of that information can be at least partially related to politics in general as opposed to some specific political issue which only receives occasional attention. Second, for conflictual attitudes (i.e. partisanship), recipients weigh the information presented against informed opinions already held by the individual. Political interest, on the other hand, is rarely discussed overtly in news coverage and is instead a result of consuming news in general. Following Norris (2000), individuals have some level of interest that drives them to consume news. Upon consuming news, interest increases. If individuals agree with the news that is being covered and how it is being covered, they will have more interest in politics. If they disagree, the result will be the same. This should hold true in all contexts including Latin America. Thus, by consuming news media of all kinds Latin Americans should demonstrate greater interest in politics.

Hypothesis: Latin Americans who consume more news media will express greater interest in politics.

2. Research Method

The focus of this project is on understanding how news media consumption affects political interest in Latin America. Given that individuals consume news media and express relative levels of political interest, individual-level data are most appropriate for answering the research question. This project employs survey data from The Americas Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) 2008 dataset.³ The survey data used herein is taken from 18 Latin American countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic. While other forms of data (i.e. voter turnout) rely on population aggregates that do not allow for inference based on individual characteristics, this study employs survey data with a large sample size that permits individual-level comparison of “all” individuals that is otherwise impossible.⁴ Besides their level of political activity and awareness, I also desired data that did not exclude individuals living in more remote areas. As survey sampling is often subject to cost concerns, excluding rural populations is commonplace because it is much less expensive per interview than to include rural populations. The 2008 LAPOP data set, however, includes all segments of the population – rural and urban, rich, middle class, and poor – so as to approximate a national probability sample. The LAPOP data thus appears to adequately address those sampling concerns.

To increase the precision of the sampling results, the sample design employed the principle of “stratification” in its sampling method. Stratification involves dividing the target populations (Latin Americans) into basic units (i.e., the country) and subunits (i.e., regions within countries). These may be further stratified into sampling frames (such as clusters of households or blocks or neighborhoods). The sample of respondents is then selected from within each subunit in proportion to their overall share of the national population. Doing this ensures that no individuals from any area are automatically excluded from the study and that the samples taken are generalizable.

³ I thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available. www.LapopSurveys.org.

⁴ By “all” individuals, I am actually seeking a sample taken from the voting age population. Although that age is 18 in most countries, there are exceptions. For instance, Nicaraguans can vote at 16. Therefore, Nicaraguans are sampled at the ages of 16 and 17 whereas Mexican sampling begins at 18.

Stratification encouraged respondent selection to be country, region, community, neighborhood, and household specific. Even when the household was selected, random interviewee selection within that household was encouraged by the use of the “next birthday” system. Once selected, interviews were conducted face-to-face by carefully trained interviewers. Anticipating the refusal of some respondents to cooperate, an estimate of non-coverage was included with a resulting oversample being drawn to compensate.

One dependent variable is employed in this study, *political interest*. The variable is a single-item response to a survey question found in the LAPOP 2008 data set. The survey question asked the respondent to identify how much interest they have in politics. The responses range from “none” to “a lot” and are scored 1 to 4.

As *political interest* has ordered values, an ordered logit model is employed (Long & Freese, 2002). The responses from each country are weighted to equal 1,500 so that each set of responses per country is weighted equally. The standard errors are also clustered per country. To evaluate the substantive impact of each variable, I utilize predicted probability tests. In those tests, a baseline set of probabilities for each response option are established by setting each variable at its mean or minimum. Then, the test is run with single measures varying by one standard deviation relative to the mean or by employing the maximum value relative to the minimum. Given that variation, the probability that a single response value will be selected can be predicted.

The primary independent variables of interest in this research project identify the regularity of news media consumption per individual per medium. I utilize four variables. One, *TV news consumption*, considers the regularity of television news media consumption. Another, *newspaper consumption*, identifies how often the respondent reads the newspaper. *Radio news consumption* measures the amount of news consumed via the radio. Finally, *Internet news consumption* captures how often the respondent gathers news via the Internet. Each of these is scored 0 to 3 (never to daily) to correspond to the degree of regularity with which the respondent consumes that specific news medium. I expect each news media consumption variable to be positively related to the dependent variable.

The remaining variables that are included in this project are intended to control for other factors that can influence attitudes, such as political interest, thus ensuring that the model is properly specified. It is axiomatic in social scientific research that basic attributes of individuals can affect their preferences and behavior (see Almond & Verba, 1963). For that reason I include variables that measure an individual's age, gender, and level of education. *Age* is a count variable ranging from 16 to 101. *Female* denotes the individuals' gender and is given a value of 1 for women and 0 for men. *Education* identifies the amount of education in years completed by the respondent and is scaled 0 to 18.

For reasons similar to those related to other demographic conditions, the amount of wealth that a person has may also influence their attitudes. Therefore, I include a *wealth* variable which is an additive measure of various items that the respondent may or may not own. These items include a television, refrigerator, land-line phone, cellular phone, vehicle (up to 3), clothes washing machine, microwave, motorcycle, potable water in the house, bathroom in the house, and computer and are scored on a scale of 0 to 13.⁵ A respondent's score depends on the number of possessions that they claim.

Community size variables are included to test the effect of the size of the community in which an individual lives on that individual's news media consumption. These variables are important to include because access to news media varies across community sizes (Rockwell & Janus, 2003).⁶ The measures for community size are coded into five dichotomous variables, *rural*, *small city*, *medium city*, *big city*, and *capital*. These variables are derived from the values recorded by the survey administrator.⁷ The administrator had five choices which were rural, small city, medium

⁵ This measure is intended to replace the typical income question. This meliorates concerns of misreporting or refusal to report often associated with income questions. The use of household wealth also circumvents issues related to individuals such as family members who have no income of their own yet live a lifestyle reflective of the income of their family. For an example of a study that uses a similar measure, see *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America* (Booth & Seligson, 2009).

⁶ As Rockwell and Janus (2003) make clear, variation in location can affect the ability to receive certain media. Areas that are more remote or that are generally difficult to get to may have problems receiving newspapers. It is that location, then, that affects newspaper readership.

⁷ Since the survey administrator recorded the community size response this ensures that individual perception of community size is not being measured. Instead the environmental reality of the size in which an individual lives is what the score represents.

city, large city, and capital city.⁸ The categorization of each community size variable was classified per country with relative population size and geographical distribution determining the exact defining parameters of the city size variables.⁹ For the purposes of the statistical tests, I exclude the *rural* variable as my baseline case to which the other community variables should be compared.

Another set of location control variables included in this project are country dummies. While there are no specific country-level conditions that are anticipated to shape interest in politics, some may exist. Therefore, each country is accounted for in the model. *Chile* is the excluded variable to which the other country dummy variables will be compared.

With the basic demographic and location control variables included herein, I also include other measures that may explain variation in the dependent variable and potentially supplant the effect of our primary variables of interest, the news media consumption variables. The first variable that I include to ensure proper specification of the model is *trust in media*. It is intuitively plausible that the degree to which an individual trusts the domestic news media industry may variably shape the impact of consuming news media on their attitudes. For instance, an individual who has low levels of trust in media may remain skeptical of the functioning of democratic institutions regardless of the reports that they are operating well. They may doubt that elections were free and fair even if news media report them as being free and fair. That lack of trust undermines the ability of news media to impact that individual's support for democracy. *Trust in media* is a single item response that asks individuals to rate, from 1 to 7, the degree to which they trust media. A score of 1 denotes no trust with a score of 7 indicating "a lot" of trust.

The second of the additional control variables is *political knowledge*. Like education, political knowledge can shape individuals' political attitudes. Also, knowledge may undermine the significance of news media consumption as those with more knowledge tend to seek more news (Norris, 2000). *Political knowledge* is an additive index of dichotomous responses to five general

⁸ The use of dummy variables, instead of a single ordered variable, is important to account for the potential of a non-linear relationship that would otherwise be assumed by using an ordered variable.

⁹ One example, reported by a LAPOP representative as being a typical criterion, denoted a *Big City* as having a population in excess of 50,000, a *Medium City* ranged from 25,000 to 50,000, and a *Small City* was less than 25,000 (but not *Rural*).

questions about politics. The questions ask about politics and institutions in the respondent's country and politics in other countries. For each correct response, the respondent receives a score of 1. Incorrect responses receive a score of 0. The scores are then added together to create a *political knowledge* index that ranges from 0 to 5.¹⁰ Table 1 displays the summary statistics for the variables included in the model with the exception of the country dummy variables.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min.	Max.
Political interest	2.017	0.955	1	4
Radio news consumption	1.750	1.136	0	3
TV news consumption	2.422	0.919	0	3
Newspaper consumption	1.257	1.082	0	3
Internet news consumption	0.351	0.777	0	3
Age	38.889	15.90	16	101
Female	0.515	0.500	0	1
Education	8.988	4.588	0	18
Wealth	5.849	2.777	0	13
Capital city	0.214	0.410	0	1
Large city	0.193	0.394	0	1
Medium city	0.153	0.360	0	1
Small city	0.145	0.352	0	1
Trust in media	4.607	1.723	1	7
Political knowledge	2.632	1.493	0	5

Source: AmericasBarometer by Latin American Public Opinion Project 2008

Country dummy variables are not shown here.

¹⁰ The five knowledge questions form an index with a scale reliability coefficient of 0.72 indicating that the questions form a coherent index.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the results of the statistical model examining political interest in Latin America. Overall, political interest is affected by many of the news media consumption variables. The ordered logit model performed well with a pseudo R-square value of 0.05. The sample size was 28,047 across 18 Latin American countries. Each of the results is discussed in turn.

Table 2: Standard Ordered Logistic Model for News Media Consumption and Political Interest

	<u>Political Interest</u>	
	coefficient	standard error
Radio news consumption	0.106**	0.010
TV news consumption	0.045	0.023
Newspaper consumption	0.115**	0.027
Internet news consumption	0.126**	0.015
Age	0.003*	0.001
Female	-0.272**	0.038
Education	0.048**	0.005
Wealth	-0.007	0.009
Capital city	-0.186**	0.065
Large city	-0.228**	0.063
Medium city	-0.215**	0.076
Small city	-0.107	0.089
Trust in media	0.046*	0.018
Political knowledge	0.190**	0.019
Country dummies ^o	+**	
Pseudo R ²	0.050	
N	28,047	
Countries	18	

*p≤.05; **p≤.01 (two-tailed)

Numbers in parenthesis indicate standard errors^o Each country dummy variable has a positive and significant parameter estimate relative to *Chile*

The results of the statistical analysis indicate that news media consumption is positively related to Latin Americans' political interest with one notable exception. Watching television news does not appear to affect political interest in a statistically reliable manner. This is most likely the case because television news is often brief and lacking depth relative to other news media. Reports on issues such as weather and sports can often move to the front of a television news broadcast but rarely does so in news media like newspapers. Also, the potential for passive consumption would undermine effects on political interest. If an individual is watching a television program that is immediately followed by the news, they may continue watching as the TV simply remains on. Thus, passive consumption and shallow coverage are aspects of television news that weaken the potential effect of watching television news on political interest in Latin America.

Each of the other three forms of news media consumption is statistically related to political interest among Latin Americans. Table 3 presents the change in the predicted probability for each possible response option given change in the amount of each news media consumed. Varying each news media consumption variable from "never consuming" to "daily consumption" reveals substantial changes in the probability of Latin Americans responding that they have no interest in politics. For listening to radio news, varying from the minimum value to the maximum value decreases the probability of a "no interest" response by 7.9%. Varying newspaper consumption and internet use for gathering news in the same manner induces a decrease in "no interest" in politics responses by 8.6% and 9.4% respectively. Each of the changes is outside the 95% confidence interval range, thus providing clear evidence that listening to radio news, reading the newspaper, and using the internet to gather news each decrease having no interest in politics. The decrease in "no interest" responses is distributed across each of the other political interest options. These results support the contention that consuming news media socializes individuals to have greater interest in politics as each news medium provides information about politics to the consumer. However, for the news media to be affective consumption must be active and coverage must be in depth.

Table 3: Predicted Probabilities for Political Interest

	A lot	Some	Little	None
Baseline Probabilities ⁿ	3.1%	8.5%	30.0%	58.4%
Radio news consumption ^o	+1.1%	+2.5%	+4.3%	-7.9%
TV news consumption ^o	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Newspaper consumption ^o	+1.2%	+2.8%	+4.6%	-8.6%
Internet news consumption ^o	+1.3%	+3.1%	+5.0%	-9.4%
Age ^a	+0.1%	+0.3%	+0.8%	-1.3%
Female ^o	-0.7%	-1.8%	-3.8%	+6.4%
Education ^a	+0.7%	+1.7%	+3.1%	-5.5%
Wealth ^a	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Capital city ^o	-0.5%	-1.3%	-2.6%	+4.4%
Large city ^o	-0.6%	-1.6%	-3.2%	+5.4%
Medium city ^o	-0.6%	-1.5%	-3.0%	+5.1%
Small city ^o	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Trust in media ^a	+0.2%	+0.6%	+1.2%	-1.9%
Political knowledge ^a	+0.9%	+2.2%	+3.9%	-7.0%

Survey Question: How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little, or none?

ⁿ Base predicted probabilities are computed by holding every variable at its minimum or mean

^a predicted probability computed by increasing from the mean to one standard deviation above the mean

^o predicted probability computed by varying from the minimum value to the maximum value

n.s. denotes “not significant”

The control variables performed as expected. Like the news media consumption variables, the largest change in the predicted probabilities center on the “no interest” responses with changes there being distributed across the other response options. As Latin Americans age, they become more interested in politics. Varying respondents’ age from the mean age of almost 39 years to one standard deviation above the mean (approximately 55 years) decreases the probability of a “no interest” response by only 1.3%. Thus, while there is statistical evidence that growing older makes Latin Americans more interested in politics, the magnitude is weak.

Females have less interest in politics than males as they are 6.4% more likely to have no interest in politics. Education positively effects political interest. Varying the level of education for Latin Americans from the mean value of nine years of education to one standard deviation above the mean (13.5 years of education) decreases the probability of having no interest in politics by 5.5%. An individual's wealth is unrelated to their political interest.

Location matters for political interest in Latin America. Relative to individuals living in rural areas, those who live in capital cities, large cities, and medium cities have less interest in politics. Latin American city dwellers are 4.4% to 5.4% more likely to express having no interest in politics than their rural counterparts. Individuals living in small cities are statistically indiscernible from individuals living in rural areas. Like location within a country, there is substantial variation across countries in Latin America.¹¹ Interestingly, each country dummy variable has a statistically significant and positive coefficient relative to the excluded category *Chile*. That is, residents of each country have more political interest than Chileans.

The degree of trust lodged with the domestic media could affect the impact of news media consumption and was therefore included in the model. Trust in media is related to political interest but only marginally so. Varying an individual's level of trust from the mean to one standard deviation above the mean only lowers the probability of a "no interest" response by 1.9%. The effect of political knowledge is much greater. Relative to the average score of political knowledge, Latin Americans with a political knowledge score that is one standard deviation higher exhibit a decrease of probability for proclaiming no interest in politics by 7%. That magnitude is quite strong given the small amount of change in political knowledge score. Some recent studies of political interest and political knowledge have embraced the two concepts' interchangeability.¹² This finding likely reinforces that assertion.

¹¹ The full ordered logit model with all country dummy variable coefficients can be found in the Appendix.

¹² A study conducted by Johnson and Arceneaux (2010) found that interest and knowledge were virtually interchangeable for motivating certain behaviors related to information seeking. This research considered factors influencing the viewing behavior of individuals when given opportunities to watch political talk shows. The study employed an experimental method.

4. Conclusion

Prior research focusing on the developed regions of Europe and North America identified political interest as the crux for understanding how news media consumption affected individuals politically (Norris, 2000). This project builds on that understanding by shifting the population of interest to focus on individuals in the developing region of Latin America. This shift appeared reasonable given the consistent nature of news products in each region as political information providers and the reality that individuals hold varying levels of interest in politics regardless of the degree of economic or political development per country. I conclude that consuming news media can influence political interest in Latin America much as it was shown to do in Europe. Digging deeper, it appears that the news media type consumed plays an important role in determining the degree of influence Latin Americans experience from consuming news media.

Consuming news media socializes individuals to have greater interest in politics by increasing the symbolic power of politics through news coverage. The results of the statistical analysis indicated that watching television news had no effect on political interest whereas a significant effect was exhibited by other news media. Thinking about the differences between news media outputs, it became apparent that of the four news media included in this study, television news experiences the most passive consumption and the shallowest news coverage. Thus, it is inappropriate to consider the impact of all news media to be the same as the intrinsic qualities of specific news media may increase/decrease their socializing potential.

As it relates to prior studies of news media effects, it appears that consuming news media in Latin America demonstrates a similar relationship with political interest as it does in the developed world. By including the control variables in the statistical model, further evidence was provided about what drives political interest with much of that evidence lining up with similar conclusions from developed region studies. The magnitude of the change in predicted probabilities for news media consumption in Latin America should encourage the continued promotion of news media consumption as a strong determinant of political interest.

Undoubtedly, this project is only intended to act as a jumping off point for additional research to be conducted in the Latin American region as this research was only intended to address one half of Norris' virtuous circle. Now that a relationship has been identified, future studies should make efforts to complete the circle. To do this will require a variety of research methods including content analysis of news productions and more nuanced survey questions and verification processes for political participation. That being said, the nature of the assumed relationship between the variables of interest lends themselves nicely to using properly administered survey data. Therefore, future research should feel comfortable standing on these findings and faithfully asserting that, like Norris' findings in Europe and North America, there is an expected and demonstrated relationship between consuming certain types of news media and Latin Americans' interest in politics. In fact, researchers focusing on postindustrial regions would do well to recognize the differences between media types and revisit the findings of Norris to see if that holds true in that context as well.

One of the most elusive qualities of social science research is generalizability. Thanks to the insight of Norris and the quality of statistical data available via the Latin American Public Opinion Project, generalization may be within reach for this most important field of research.

6. Appendix

Table: Standard Ordered Logistic Model for News Media Consumption and Political Interest with All Variables

Variables	<u>Political Interest</u>	
	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error
Radio news consumption	0.106**	0.010
TV news consumption	0.045	0.023
Newspaper consumption	0.115**	0.027
Internet news consumption	0.126**	0.015
Age	0.003*	0.001
Female	-0.272**	0.038
Education	0.048**	0.005
Wealth	-0.007	0.009
Capital city	-0.186**	0.065
Large city	-0.228**	0.063
Medium city	-0.215**	0.076
Small city	-0.107	0.089
Trust in media	0.046*	0.018
Political knowledge	0.190**	0.019
Mexico	1.131**	0.036
Guatemala	0.380**	0.026
El Salvador	1.055**	0.035
Honduras	0.928**	0.045
Costa Rica	0.281**	0.029
Nicaragua	0.622**	0.043
Panama	0.554**	0.029
Colombia	1.228**	0.069
Ecuador	0.405**	0.028
Bolivia	0.742**	0.035

Peru	0.604**	0.036
Paraguay	1.022**	0.040
Uruguay	1.171**	0.039
Brazil	0.844**	0.036
Venezuela	1.104**	0.040
Argentina	1.106**	0.047
Dominican Republic	1.786**	0.057
Pseudo R ²	0.050	
N	28,047	
Countries	18	

*p \leq .05; **p \leq .01 (two-tailed)

The excluded category (for comparison) for the community size variables is *Rural*

The excluded category (for comparison) for the country dummy variables is *Chile*

7. References

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